



Observatory PASCAL

Place Management, Social Capital and Learning Regions

PURE Regional Visit Report (RVR1)

*KENT, UNITED KINGDOM
Preamble and Context – Kent and Essex
20th – 22nd April, 2009*

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1 Introduction

This was a joint review of both Kent and Essex. It followed an earlier CDG visit to the Thames Gateway in which both counties have a part, and which gave some initial understanding of some parts of both these county regions. Both Authorities had prepared regional briefing papers for the CDG: the CDG spent 1 day in Kent and a day and a half in Essex.

In Kent, the team heard presentations from Professor Vickerman of Kent University on the economic impact of the University on the regional economy, and from David George focussing on the developments in transport infrastructure and regeneration of Kent Thameside, within the Thames Gateway area of the County. It was able to discuss a range of issues with a number of stakeholders in a plenary meeting. Because of sickness, a planned presentation of Kent strategies for vocational education in schools and further education could not be given.

In Essex, the CDG met with 2 universities, received presentations from the Regional Economic Development Agency and from Insight East, an analytical unit supported by the Agency, and participated in a valuable meeting over dinner with a range of stakeholders in Essex County Council, and other bodies.

This report was prepared as two separate parts concerning, with some common materials. In relation to Kent in particular, the team did not feel they were able to gain a fully rounded picture of the issues because the input possible during the visit was less extensive than had been planned. Nevertheless, a number of insights should inform the developing situation in the County.

The purposes of the initial visit were as follows:

- **to familiarise key stakeholders in the regions about the PURE project and process;**
- **to enable the CDG properly to understand the nature of the Kent and Essex regions, the main developmental priorities and aspirations in the region, and the context in which these developments were being pursued;**
- **to form preliminary views on issues relating to the engagement of higher education institutions (HEIs) in the regions on priority developmental themes; and**
- **to agree programmes of work, including benchmarking, to be taken forward following the Vancouver PURE workshop and for the second CDG visit in early 2010.**

2. KENT

2.1 Key Regional Characteristics

For the purposes of the PURE project, the Kent region is defined as the area covered by Kent County Council, which is an 'upper tier' local authority in England. As such it has responsibility for sub-national roads infrastructure, schools, social services, some aspects of economic and social development and a range of community services, delivered within a national legislative and administrative framework. Within the Kent area there are also 12 lower level local authorities responsible mainly for housing and land use planning.

Kent has a population of some 1.4 million: the county has no single dominant urban centre, stretching from the southern fringes of London to the English Channel and North Sea coasts, an area of some 3500 sq. km. The largest urban area in the region, the Medway Towns with an additional population of around 1/4m, has been a separate local government Authority since 1998.

The economy of the county has undergone significant re-structuring over the past 25 years. Whilst the County retains strengths in manufacturing, pharmaceuticals and the agricultural sector, the economy has substantially diversified with a predominance of small and medium sized businesses. GDP per capita is now some 12% below the UK national average. Unemployment is slightly above the national average, and around 81% of the working age population is economically active. Workforce skill levels are relatively poor with 26% qualified to NVQ level 4 compared with 28.6% nationally, and 30.8% in the south east England region.

Social and economic diversity are a feature of the region. Whilst 85% of the land is classified as rural, 69% of the population live in urban settlements. The county contains both the 59th least deprived area in England and the 69th most deprived (out of 354 districts). Typically levels of deprivation are higher in those urban areas previously dependent on industry and in a smaller number of peripheral rural and coastal areas. Overall 9.5% of the population are from ethnic minorities, but this rises to 15.8% in some places. Kent's proximity to London is an important feature. Earnings measured by residence are some 6% higher than earnings measured by workplace in Kent, reflecting the attraction of employment opportunities beyond the regional boundary.

There are 4 universities located within the County, and recent years have seen the development of some local campuses in areas of traditionally low participation in higher education.

2.2 Regional priorities, ambitions and aspirations

For the purposes of the PURE project, the County identified a number of problems and challenges. These are:

- Relatively low skill levels in the workforce;
- Need to improve graduate retention and develop higher level skills;
- Persistent gap in GVA between Kent and South East England;
- Persistent areas of social deprivation, especially in former industrial and peripheral areas;
- Lack of critical concentration of knowledge-based infrastructure;
- High cost of living and lack of affordability which impacts on service delivery;
- Managing an ageing population;

- Consequences of climate change, especially given the low lying estuarial nature of some of Kent's urban areas.

These problems and challenges underlie the development aspirations which are set out in a recent strategy document *Vision for Kent*. They span 8 themes concerned with promoting economic success, learning for everyone, and improved health and well being in stronger safer communities. The region was able also to identify some opportunities and strengths arising particularly from the region's strategic location between London and continental Europe, advanced rail and road infrastructure, and in particular the London – Paris/Brussels high speed rail link, its proximity to the large employment market, knowledge base and transport connections through London, significant regeneration investment in the Thames Gateway area and other designated growth areas, and the relative affordability compared with elsewhere in south east England of commercial development.

2.3 Key issues and findings

Engagement of Universities

Professor Vickerman provided the CDG with an analysis of the economic impact of the University of Kent on the local economy. It was clear that the University was a major factor in the local economy through its role as an employer, a purchaser of goods and services, and through bringing significant numbers of students drawn from a wide area across the UK and internationally, relative to the population of Canterbury and the surrounding districts. The paper provided an analysis of economic impact up to 2005/6. In discussion of wider impacts it appeared that the University's focus was to remain competitive internationally and nationally, and it did not see itself playing a significant regional role. For example it offered no credit-based community education, and no foundation degrees on campus. It had undertaken some research to support policy analysis within Kent, for example on ageing, and aspects of social inclusion, migration and asylum seekers, and in international transport and climate change. It had some but not extensive links with local industry.

Kent County Council had signed a service level agreement with the University of Kent, which included for example, access to the Kent County Council office facility in Brussels, but otherwise was not seen to have led to significant activity.

The orientation of the University of Kent was contrasted strongly with that of Canterbury Christchurch University (CCU) which had an explicit commitment in its mission statement to support local communities. It offered employer-based learning, CPD, foundation degrees and internship programmes. CCU was also a partner in a £3m project to undertake research to support the development of local service providers in the voluntary sector in the region.

The CDG had no direct contact with the 2 other universities within the region, Greenwich and the University of the Creative Arts. However, it did seem clear that engagement was very variable in nature and extent, and depended crucially on universities chosen orientation and perception of its own best interests.

Universities and social inclusion

There were examples of the development of local HE facilities in neighbourhoods which had traditionally had local rates of participation in HE, notably on the Medway campus, shared by the Universities of Kent, Greenwich and Christchurch Canterbury, and the Thanet campus at Broadstairs. It was suggested that for some institutions, participation in such projects was 'defensive', to maintain their visibility in the locality, whereas for others it was clearly part of their strategy for community engagement. Canterbury Christchurch University for example



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insisted that academics worked on both main and local campuses, even though the most research-intensive departments were on the main campus.

The Thanet campus had strong links with Thanet College of Further Education and there were other examples of HE validation of FE provision. There was a concern to develop gateways to the professions in health and police.

In the planning of regeneration of the Kent Thameside area consideration had been given to the establishment of a local university presence within the area, but to date this had not materialised. The provision needed further thought, given the relative proximity of other localised provision.

Links with schools

Kent County retains a system of selective secondary education throughout its area. Approximately 25% of secondary school places are provided in academically orientated Grammar schools, and it was recognised that the selective system did have important implications for poverty of aspiration in some communities and amongst those not successful in the selective system. Both Kent and Christchurch universities were working with schools, and especially the non-grammar schools to promote aspirations to participate in HE.

Links with business

Links between HEIs, local authorities, and the business community in the region seemed at best to be patchy, rather fragmented and under-developed. Whilst there are formal bodies such as the Kent Economic Board, universities did not appear to be particularly active participants. Kent University had established the Kent University Business Engagement project (KUBE) to promote business engagement, but opinion seemed to be that in a situation of scattered settlement patterns and in a sector dominated by small businesses, engagement was difficult.

An Innovation Centre had been established at Kent University, but there was no financial link between the university and local authorities to support innovation and knowledge transfer. The University had supported a number of high-tech spin out companies, but these were not a major feature of the local economy.

The CDG was struck by the lack of reference to the agricultural sector or to the heritage industries in the discussion, both of which were identified as significant in the region in the initial documentation. Nor was there any attempt to assess the regional impact of the universities' global development strategy.

Economic development

There is the Kent Partnership, described as a broad church of stakeholders, which is concerned to develop a vision for development in Kent through local strategic partnership. It was commented that, although HEIs were members, there was not much evidence of partnership working. Other bodies were identified which were concerned with aspects of economic development and addressing skills issues. For example the Kent Skills Board attempted to articulate demand for skills and training. The Thames Gateway – HEI partnership was seen as being driven by central government and was focused on the Kent Thameside region of Kent within the Thames Gateway area. The Kent Association of Further Education Colleges (KAFEC) linked with the Learning and Skills Council to co-ordinate FE provision and investment. The Vice-chancellors of the Universities in Kent also met periodically to consider issues of inter-relations between the HE institutions in the area. However, none of these bodies were seen by those with whom the CDG met at least, to be

particularly effective in the delivery of an effective skills strategy in the Kent area, or in the development of an effective innovation strategy. Indeed, there did not appear to be any places, for example science parks, where innovative knowledge-based activities would be focussed which would attract highly qualified workers to the region and mitigate the effects of a 'brain drain' to London.

2.4 Overall

The impression gained from the discussion was one of little evident systematic engagement between the universities, the business community and the public authorities within the Kent county area. Whilst a number of liaison bodies did exist, it was not evident that there is clear partnership working between the sectors to address the skills and economic development issues identified above. There was even the suggestion that the County Council could pursue the policy objectives without engaging with the HE sector.

2.5 Special Interests

The original focus of discussion was concerned with the contribution which might be made by the higher education sector to the development of skills within the region and to economic development. The variable and patchy practice which had been described led to a concern with the value that there might be in the County developing a regional policy on establishing a relationship with the higher education sector within the County. The relationship might lead to a more systematic engagement with business, including the public sector.

2.6 Examples of Good Practice

The CDG was not made aware of any particular examples of good practice which would merit writing-up as demonstrating good practice in the area of interest in focus here.

2.7 Action Plan

There was interest especially from the representative from Canterbury Christchurch University to undertake the benchmarking of their institutional engagement with the Kent region.

Secondly there was interest in facilitating more systematic contacts between the higher education sector and, the region and the business community. To this end it was suggested a PURE working party be established by Kent CC to consider the development of a regional policy for engagement with the higher education sector. Engagement would be broadly defined to include research and development and innovation processes.

3 Concluding Observations

This report has presented observations on the Kent Essex region separately from Essex. The CDG were nevertheless aware of a number of similarities between the two, and some important contrasts. This last section highlights some key aspects of these, in the expectation that the comparative insights may be helpful in taking issues forward either in the regions concerned or elsewhere.

There are strong similarities in the location and nature of the Kent and Essex regions. Both are largely rural with polycentric settlement patterns, but close to the pull of London. Both have extensive coastlines, important environmental sites, but with pockets of significant social and economic deprivation. Both have a strong historical heritage which there is a desire to protect in



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the face of regional government demands for substantial additional housing and job creation in the next 20 years. So far as the economy is concerned, both are well placed close to Europe and with major port and transport links which potentially give access to international markets. Both have large rural agricultural sectors, and also a significant proportion of their working population commuting outside the County to London.

Both counties have experienced the decline of traditional occupations, and whilst both retain a manufacturing base and have major employers, there is a need for re-skilling and up-skilling in the workforce, and for attracting and sustaining new employment opportunities through inward investment and support to existing business. Both areas have large numbers of small and medium sized businesses, many of which are micro- or lifestyle businesses. Both Counties are similarly placed in terms of their responsibilities within English local and Regional government, and from the PURE perspective, contain a number of Universities which embrace different missions, some focussed regionally whilst others focus more globally.

In both areas the potential for engagement of the higher education sector was recognised (at the time of the visit probably more so in Essex than in Kent), but engagement appeared sporadic and ad hoc. This observation would apply both to the County Council and to the HEIs. The regionally focussed HEIs had strong programmes of engagement with the public sector in Kent and with the business sector in Essex. In Essex, the more globally orientated university was also clear that it was *in* the region and had a role in regional development. That awareness was much less evident in Kent.

Complex partnerships existed between the public authorities, HEIs and the business communities in both Kent and Essex. Frequently, these were bilateral partnerships: regular opportunities for regular meetings between all three sectors did not seem to be present. Partnership working in Kent in particular did not seem to be very effective. In both contexts the issue of leadership was apparent – it was not clear where the leadership to secure more focussed strategic partnership working would be found.

There were other common issues too. Knowledge transfer and innovation was not strong, and business seemed to find it difficult to 'find a way in' to the HE sector. With respect to skills, analytical capacity to future proof skills requirements needed further development at County level, even if some such analysis was being undertaken at the Regional government level. Exploitation of the benefits of international links both of HEIs and civic links of public authorities to secure economic benefits for the county was not well developed. There were indications that some European Union programmes, for example on internships, could be exploited too, to the benefit of local economies and to increase local retention of graduates.

There was a sense of a willingness to innovate in policy-making in both Kent and Essex. Whilst in Kent there appeared to the CDG to be frustration with the legislative context in which the authority was placed, Essex had more evidently pushed the boundaries of the local authority role in some recent initiatives. Nevertheless, discussion in both localities became focussed on the need to explore more systematically what the benefits of a more strategic relationship between the public sector, the business community and the HEI sector would be, and the ways in which that could be facilitated and sustained. This is likely to form the core of future work under the PURE programme.